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ABSTRACT

In today's information and technology-driven world, an increasing number of moral and ethical dilemmas arise. Information ethics involves many complex and challenging issues for today's educators. "The Principles of Information Ethics," by Richard Severson, provides a thought-provoking and common sense discussion of issues related to use of the Internet and other aspects of our information society. This paper reviews the book and presents real situations, as well as other recent and relevant literature, with the goal of offering a simple and practical guide for dealing with moral and ethical questions in information technology. The paper outlines Severson's Four Principles of Information Ethics and Severson's Four-Step Method of Principled Ethics. It then goes on to discuss each principle--respect for intellectual property, respect for privacy, fair representation, and non maleficence. Tips for presenting information about copyright to teachers are provided at the end of the paper. (AEF)

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# Cyberethics and K.I.S.S.---Keeping it Simple for Success!

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**ABSTRACT** -- In today's information and technology-driven world, an increasing number of moral and ethical dilemmas arise. The Principles of Information Ethics, by Richard Severson, provides a thought provoking and commonsense discussion of issues related to use of the Internet and other aspects of our information society. This paper will review the book and present real live situations as well as other recent and relevant literature with the goal of offering a simple and practical guide for dealing with moral and ethical questions in information technology.

**OVERVIEW** -- Information ethics involves many complex and challenging issues for today's educators. Even individuals who strive to maintain high ethical standards may find it difficult to determine the best path in the face of new and unfamiliar situations. While today's problems often arise from rapidly emerging technologies, the values we can successfully call upon to cope with them are the same values that have endured through history. These values still serve us well today as we face the millennium and seek to make sound moral and ethical decisions about complex dilemmas brought on by the technologies that we use.

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Richard W. Severson's book, The Principles of Information Ethics, offers guidelines for coping with ethical dilemmas through a process he calls principled reflection. His premise is that people working with information technology need a brief list of simple guidelines for ethical decision-making, much like those developed by biomedical or legal ethicists (Severson, 1995). To this end, Severson offers four statements of principle, and a four-step method for handling difficult situations. Severson's Four Principles of Information Ethics are:

1. Respect for intellectual property
2. Respect for privacy
3. Fair Representation
4. Non maleficence (or "doing no harm") (Severson, 1997).

In order to sort through the complexities of situations involving information ethics, Severson offers The Four-Step Method of Principled Ethics:

1. Get the facts straight
2. Identify the moral dilemma
3. Evaluate the moral dilemma using the principles of information ethics to decide which side has the most ethical support
4. Test your solution: will it stand up to public scrutiny (1997).

Before discussing the principles at length, Severson takes time to define "morality" and "ethics" and to differentiate between the two terms. He defines morality as the basic understanding of right and wrong that is ingrained in us from childhood. According to Severson, morality is the voice of conscience that makes us feel

uncomfortable when we do something which violates our concepts of right and wrong. He describes ethics as the rules, guidelines, and laws under which we live. State and federal laws, school district policies, acceptable use policies, etc. are examples of ethical guidelines. In some realms, such as copyright, there are so many laws and rules in existence that it is hard to see past them to simple moral truths. By becoming extremely legalistic, we may lose sight of morality. In other areas, such as electronic communications and computer crime, laws may be insufficient to cover every situation. Then morality needs to lead the way in promoting the necessary ethical guidelines. In all situations involving difficult decisions, morality and ethics must work in concert to arrive at the best solutions.

The first principle cited by Severson is respect for intellectual property. In education, the greatest challenges to this tenet involve copyright. It is safe to say that every school faces situations involving copyright, which affect teachers, librarians, administrators, and students. Most educators are at least aware of copyright as it applies to print. Administrators and librarians frequently discourage illegal photocopying, and teachers warn students to avoid plagiarizing. Questions about audio recordings, videotapes, and computer software generate more confusion. The right things to do are to become educated about copyright guidelines, to have reliable references available to use when questions arise, and to continually be aware of the issue. Principled reflection using Severson's four steps can assist in determining the moral and ethical path regarding copyright questions.

The second principle Severson offers is respect for privacy. Educators need to understand the nature of e-mail and the dangers of using it for confidential or personal

messages. Students should be taught the responsible and ethical use of e-mail as well. Confidentiality of student records and information is another privacy issue in education. Librarians should be protectors of students' requests for information and their circulation records. Teachers should be protectors of students' test results and other academic records. Web masters must exercise great care that information and pictures published in school web pages do not violate the privacy of students or staff.

The third principle Severson offers is fair representation. Most of his examples are from the world of business, such as advertising claims and trade agreements, but this concept can readily be applied to education. Regarding advertising, educators may find themselves on the receiving end of transactions where advertisers use questionable practices, as they seek to spend hard-earned funds on products which vendors claim will do more than they actually accomplish. The wise purchaser will look for impartial reviews, preview software, and seek other accurate information before buying. Internet sites which present themselves as authoritative and educational but which really promote a particular bias are not representing them accurately. Sites with frames that make other websites appear to be their own are not presenting a true representation of authorship. Users should carefully evaluate Internet locations with validity and fair representation in mind. Additionally, educators should be careful to deliver what is promised to parents and students. Fair representation should be a priority for educators, both as providers and as consumers.

Severson's final principle is non maleficence, or doing to harm. This is a gauge by which we would do well to measure all our decisions and actions. Regarding computer

use, students should be taught that computer hacking is not a harmless prank or an innocent learning experience. Because malicious use does interfere with the educational process and can damage equipment, it is a serious offense that should carry appropriate consequences. Districts and campuses should have acceptable use policies in place that address the issue of hacking.

Teachers should also be aware of the unethical practices of some Internet web site creators. Examples include the posting of pornographic sites with addresses very similar to those of sites students are likely to use, or the inclusion in the metatags of such sites of words frequently used in student searches. Because laws and rules governing hacking and Internet use are still being developed and must constantly evolve to keep up with innovations, morality must take the lead in deciding whether an activity is appropriate. The four steps of principled reflection can contribute to making the best decision in a difficult situation. Teachers need to set examples and lead the way in teaching students the principle of maleficence.

Technology is a powerful tool that influences our lives in countless ways. It offers creative and exciting new methods for educators and students to grow and learn. Leaders should be well versed and constantly keep up to date regarding rules and regulations related to the use of technology.

Through principled reflection, educators can make wise decisions in complex situations. Through principled leadership, educators can help students become responsible and productive citizens in an increasingly technological society.

Tips for Presenting Information about Copyright to Teachers:

- Rather than offering lengthy explanations of copyright laws, make teachers aware of basic concepts.
- Have an authoritative source of information readily available for checkout and for reference. Copyright for Schools, by Carol Simpson, is recommended.
- If copyright training is first being introduced in a school, do not expect immediate and total compliance. Some schools focus on one aspect at a time, such as starting with a focus on the correct use of videotapes.
- Avoid scare tactics, accusations, or preaching.
- Stress positive reasons for compliance. In a 1996 presentation, ASCD director Stan Zenor offered the following powerful reason to respect copyright: "Without copyright, there would be no original work. Everybody would just copy someone else. Copyright forces us to think for ourselves and be creative" (S. Zenor, personal communication, June 1997).
- Offer attractive, practical, and positive alternatives to existing practices that violate copyright rules. For example, purchase some videotapes which allow performance rights for situations when they are needed.
- Encourage teachers and students to showcase original student work in displays and websites rather than copying or reproducing images.

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